



COMMONSENSE AND IMPROVING SCHOOLING

A Speech by The Honorable Norman Lacy, MP,
Assistant Minister of Education, Government of Victoria
to the Victorian Primary Principal's Association.

This speech, by one of the Ministers responsible for the most significant restructuring of administration of a major State Government department argues that the school system needs to strengthen both the teaching of basic skills and the direction of school curriculum. The approach outlined is that the education system should identify those children who are not performing according to their potential and introduce organisational strategies to maximise their opportunities to do so.

31st March 1980

Thank you for the opportunity to address this important conference today.

As professionals, whether teachers, educational specialists, or administrators, we share a fundamental commitment to improving both our craft and our performance in it. I have not yet met a teacher who believes that he cannot do things better than at present.

Whether through a new educational theory, a new teaching method, an administrative structure, or an educational aid, we can all contemplate and regularly promote improvements in education. This is the way it should be in a progressive organisation made up of intelligent, articulate, and enthusiastic professionals.



What is alarming is to find that there are some commentators with vested industrial interests who wish to disturb the development of the lively debate which should ensue in and around this organisation - the *Education Department of Victoria*. These people want to label every suggestion for improvement as either an '*attack on the school system*' or '*teacher bashing*'. They want to shout slogans rather than entertain ideas. Their motives are transparent - they want to protect the status quo and keep the system '*safe*'. '*As it has always been so it should always be*' is their theme. This is conservatism and anti-professionalism at its worst.

I am not disappointed to find that I am regularly at the end of their barbs. I have questioned some aspects of present educational practice. I have raised doubts about the efficiency of school organisation and have pointed out that State education is losing support. However, I have not attacked teachers, nor claimed that schools are failing, nor demanded that schooling become narrow. At every opportunity I speak in support of the professionalism of the teachers working in the Education Department, but the selective quoting of my comments makes it necessary for me to make my position clear.

A newspaper report of a recent speech has been used to suggest that I attacked teachers for not teaching, and interpreted curriculum as meaning just the basic skills without any other options being available. A reading of the whole speech will reveal that my analysis of the school system is not as simple as some commentators would want to portray. Indeed, their responses brought to my mind the remark of Disraeli to the *House of Commons* in 1860: "*It is much easier to be critical than correct.*"

It has been my consistent view that the school system needs to strengthen both the teaching of basic skills and the direction of school curriculum. To argue for the strengthening of the teaching of basic skills is neither a call for a return to the methods of yesteryear nor an accusation that standards have declined.

There is little point in attempting to argue the latter since there is no basis for testing such a proposition. My approach is that we should identify those children who are not performing according to their potential and we should introduce organisational strategies to maximise their

opportunities to do so.

To this end I established, during 1979, a committee to report to me on the nature and organisation of special assistance programs in our primary schools. That Committee has now completed its work and I have recently released their report for public comment.

I believe that the spirit of the report is consistent with international trends in the development of procedures for meeting the special needs of children in primary schools.

The Committee drew attention to the need for more systematic identification, prevention and treatment of learning difficulties and put forward ways of developing a total program of special assistance for children at risk of illiteracy and innumeracy.

The spirit of the report is also consistent with the policy of the *Primary Schools Division* in regard to remediation. I know your Division accepts the concept of individual differences as a basic to any approach to children's learning but also recognises that particular children will encounter learning difficulties requiring special attention.

The Committee's emphasis on the first responsibility for the management of these needs resting with the school is appropriate to modern school organisation. However, the Committee stresses the need for professional support for school based special assistance programs and therefore encourages the continuation of district based special services.

The rationale of providing necessary specialist services through district based centres, while realising the need for individual schools to have adequate resources for special needs, also recognises that some learning difficulties will be beyond the resources of individual schools. Assessment at this level requires a multi-disciplinary input of the type and range found in *Counseling Guidance and Clinical Services Units* and *Special Education Units*.

However, the report clearly recognises that if we are to develop special assistance resources at the school level then there is a need to:

- rationalise existing services, and
- develop new services.

Accordingly it recommends that the development of a structure to strengthen school based programs should include:-

1. The development of 53 *Special Assistance Centres* across the state by incorporating the 10 Remedial Centres and the 43 Opportunity Remedial Centres already existing.
2. The rationalisation of other existing resources such as 48 *Special Education Units*, 5 *Demonstration Units*, one *Reading Treatment and Research Centre* and 25 *Counseling Guidance and Clinical Service Centres* into a total program structure.
3. The designation of an experienced teacher with Special Education qualifications as the *Special Assistance Resource Teacher* to be a member of the staff of every school or group of schools within existing establishment levels to be responsible at the school level for the management of special assistance programs.

4. The recognition of the fundamental role of the classroom teacher in special assistance programs which should be provided to children with learning difficulties in such a way as to allow them to remain as far as possible in the normal classroom.
5. The introduction of compulsory learning difficulty units in initial teacher training.

I have already asked your Director to take the necessary steps to implement the recommendations relating to the rationalisation of the *Opportunity Remedial Centres* and the *Remedial Centres*.

The report also proposed the establishment of a small group to assist with the further implementation of any recommendations and Mr. Collins, Mr. Mervyn Kydd, Director of Special Services and Mr. Des Pickering, of the *Institute of Special Education* at *Burwood State College* have agreed to join me in undertaking this task.

I doubt if anyone would want to make a claim that all our school-leavers exhibit sufficient standards in basic skills to enable them to live successfully in the complex society of today and I am optimistic that the report will result in a total program that will be a major initiative in combating illiteracy and innumeracy in our schools.

This report is just one indication of my belief that there is no justification for complacency with standards in basic skills. There is a need to assure the public, which is '*footing the education bill*', that schools are doing as much as they can to ensure that all students become literate and numerate.

Gathering appropriate information and publicising it is the only way to achieve this goal. When the education system is being questioned it is not sufficient for educationists to state simply that everything is fine.

A statement by the president of the *Australian Teachers' Federation*, that the national monitoring study of literacy and numeracy is an attempt to prove that schools are failing, falls into this category.

The national assessment program will provide to schools much needed assistance in the measurement of student outcomes. The *Australian Education Council* accepted, at their meeting in Perth last year, a proposal I put forward for a national program for the assessment of basic skills in literacy and numeracy. The primary purpose of such a program is to gather information concerning the degree to which educational goals are being met. Reliable information will therefore be available, for the first time, to education systems thus enabling them to better identify specific needs and to establish essential priorities.

The need for such assessment has also been recommended by the *Williams Inquiry into Education and Training* and by a Study Group of the *Education Research and Development Committee*.

The *Australian Council for Educational Research* has been responsible for the development of the assessment program and it is proposed that the ACER, in co-operation with State and non-government education systems, will administer the national survey tests.

It should be emphasised however that individual schools must be the focal point of any measure of student performance and should be responsible for monitoring its own performance in attaining overall curriculum goals and specific curriculum objectives.

Therefore the ACER proposal for the development of a *School Achievement Program* provides a rationale and strategy for testing at three levels. The progress tests are intended for use by classroom and remedial teachers during a course of study at the conclusion of meaningful units of the teacher's program for an individual student or for the class. Review tests are intended for use by school principals and classroom teachers either at the beginning or end of a course to summarize student achievement in a specific area of the curriculum.

The national tests involve both a sampling of items and a sampling of students to provide information at the school system level. The content of survey tests would either be at a higher level of generality than that of review tests and would meet the needs of regional offices, non-Government school systems, State and Commonwealth Departments of education and appropriate research groups.

There is, in fact, a high level of agreement among teachers regarding the standards that students should be able to achieve in these skills if they are not to be disadvantaged either in further progress through the school or in their everyday lives. In general, schools are not failing in this endeavor because teachers agree on the importance of these skills for the students who are their responsibility.

At a time when there is some questioning by public groups of the effectiveness of schooling it appears important that means are provided to education systems to evaluate their operation and, with firm and reliable evidence, answer such questioning. There are many compelling social reasons for ensuring that our young people have increased competence in literacy and numeracy, and an increased knowledge and understanding of themselves and the society in which they live.

Yet I am concerned that the proposal of a policy that will strengthen a common core curriculum across what is a state-wide system has aroused suggestions that I am intent on the coercion of schools into a narrow utilitarian function. However, to argue for a compulsory core curriculum is not to argue either for coercion or for a narrow curriculum. I have never proposed that a significant amount of time should not be given over to a wide range of options. All I have suggested is that there is a central core which is essential in the learning of all children. To propose that this central core should be compulsory simply means that the school system must, by some method or other, initiate children into that curriculum and then consequently develop individual skills appropriate to the ability of each child.

Indeed, proposing a common core curriculum for all does not even involve proposing a common teaching approach. However, it does seem entirely reasonable that educators be asked to evaluate the effectiveness of differing teaching styles and then to comment intelligently on the results of that evaluation. If it appears that a teaching style does not elicit a positive response from children then it is entirely reasonable to expect educators to adopt another proven style.

Enough research has been done already and enough experience in teaching to suggest that it is unlikely that there is any one right way of doing things. Different ways will suit different children and different subjects. Further, to suggest a formal teaching method is not to say that the relationship between teacher and pupil need be formal. There appears to be unnecessary confusion between the deconstructing and the opening of formal relationships within a school and the need to present some material, albeit within that open relationship, in a formally structured developmental program.

The desire to create less formal personal relationships in schools is in keeping with the accelerating change in attitudes to human relations within our society. The importance therefore of a properly integrated educational program cannot be overlooked by our school system.

In accordance with the Government's pre-election undertaking, I have initiated a proposal to encourage the development of education in health and human relations in the curriculum of Victorian schools. I recognise that already in many schools, health and human relations education forms an important part of the curriculum.

The community, I am sure, will appreciate our plans to develop the courses and will agree with the basic principles on which we are proceeding.

Those principles are:-

1. Schools have a responsibility for the promotion of health in both the individual and in the community.
2. Schools will fulfil this responsibility through providing appropriate education in health and human relations.
3. Education in health and human relations is a basic educational right for every child in all primary and post-primary schools in this State.
4. Education in health and human relations should involve students, their parents, the staff and members of the local community. The values and beliefs upheld within the school community, the local community and the society within which they exist will influence the nature of this involvement.